

# **The Interpretation of Christianity by American Indian Prophets**

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this article is to point out that the Indian prophetic movements enabled the American Indians to reassert their Native identity. It will be demonstrated that Christianity was a form of acculturation through which the Natives succeeded in resisting white encroachment and Christian proselytizing. Finally, several similarities prove what the prophetic movements promised, as far as the spiritual *and* political impact was concerned.

Before discussing the concept of “revitalization” and “nativistic” movements and defining the Indian prophets’ movements, however, it is necessary to explain the sources of these Indian revivalist movements. Since the time of first contact, American Indians have had to cope with an omnipresent Christian faith and they realized that their only choice was to act and react against proselytizing through continuous political and spiritual battles. To resist proselytizing, many Indians chose to revive their spirituality and redefine the concept of religious leaders. Many new Indian religious leaders came to be known as “Indian prophets.” One of the most famous Indian messiahs was the Delaware Prophet—known as Neolin—who preached a return to the ancestors’ traditions and condemned the Europeans’ bad influence over the Indian nations. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, a series of Indian prophets including the Seneca Prophet, the Shawnee Prophet, and the Kickapoo Prophet

emerged and attempted to preserve Indian identity and culture by spreading the word of the Great Spirit.

Preserving cultural identity implied that Indian prophets had to adapt to a changing religious and political environment. A new environment meant creating new ways of spiritually guiding the Indian nations. Religious leaders, therefore, created a syncretic religion that blended native beliefs and some elements of Christianity. This syncretic religion was referred to as “revitalization” or “nativistic” movements. In believing in “revitalization” movements, the Indians revived their faith in native spirituality and were able to challenge and oppose Christian missions and thus, Christianity.

This Indian resistance gave birth, from the mid-eighteenth century, to religious Indian revivals. Although “revitalization movements,” “nativistic movements,” “prophetic movements,” or “messianic movements” all involve a notion of renewal and religious revival, further explanation is necessary to differentiate the nature of each movement. In 1943, anthropologist Ralph Linton coined the term “nativistic movements” meaning “any conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture.”<sup>1</sup> Almost ten years later another anthropologist—Anthony F.C. Wallace—stated, “A culture can be renewed quite rapidly, even within a generation, if its members seek to revitalize it not in some ad hoc manner but in an organized and conscious way.”<sup>2</sup> This cultural, religious, and political resistance was termed “revitalization movements.” “Revitalization movements” can also be defined as political-religious movements promising deliverance from deprivation, the elimination of foreign domination, and a new interpretation of the human condition based on traditional cultural values, common in societies undergoing severe stress associated with colonial conquest and intense class or racial exploitation.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after contact, American Indians understood that the invaders would attempt to coerce them into obeying to the white man’s laws, ethics, and religion. As a result, wars and massacres occurred. To counter the white man’s intrusion in their territories, the harmful effects of the alcohol trade, game shortage, the numerous treaties that led them to be trapped in reservations, or the missionaries’ attempts to change the natives into “good Christians,” some consulted the guardian spirits. Some experienced visions during which they received instructions to set their people free and some declared themselves to be *the* prophet, namely the one who would “fore [tell] the regeneration of the Indigenous Peoples and the recapture of lands from the settlers, provided that Native Americans accepted the idea of ethnic brotherhood and that they follow prescribed religious practices.”<sup>4</sup> Handsome Lake, Tenkwatawa, and Kenekuk were such people. Coming from different areas, these men proclaimed themselves the saviour of the Indigenous people.

Although a religious resistance had always prevailed among the Natives, the nineteenth century experienced the emergence of numerous revitalization movements in different parts of the United States. The Ghost Dance Movement

of 1890 was the most famous revitalization movement. But other movements also had a great impact on American Indians. Like every colonized people, the colonists' culture, traditions, and religion affected Native Americans. When a general revival of evangelicalism – known as the Great Awakening – occurred among the American colonies and reached its peak in the 1740s, the Native Americans obviously heard of it. The Great Awakening was a series of religious revivals that swept over the American colonies.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, a few decades later that more and more Indians began to view some aspects of Christianity as a salutary way against white encroachment. Some of the Indian prophets' teachings had their source in the Protestant revivals that occurred in the early 1800s. The Second Great Awakening, differed from the First Great Awakening in that:

salvation was open to all, rejecting the doctrine of predestination that had characterized Calvinism. The teachings stressed the emotional nature of conversion experience far more than the need for careful study and preparation. Such preachers were in effect *democratizing* (emphasis added) American religion, making it available to all rather than to a preselected and educated elite.<sup>6</sup>

The revival began in New York and progressively spread throughout the country.<sup>78</sup> Understandably, Native Americans appropriated some European religious traditions and practices in their struggle to survive invasion. Many Indians created a syncretic religion with some Christian elements and traditional Indian customs blended. According to Munro S. Edmonson, who gives clear definitions of religious concepts in *Nativism, Syncretism, and Anthropological Science*, "We may define syncretism as the integration (and consequent secondary elaboration) of selected aspects of two or more historically distinct traditions."<sup>79</sup> This is precisely what happened in the nineteenth-century Indian nativistic movements. The new Indian religious leaders revived their native religions while integrating elements of Christianity.

The nativists quickly understood that the only means to succeed in reviving their culture was to appropriate the most favorable elements of an alien and dominant religion. A blend between two cultures seemed to be the solution. Every prophet defined his own concept of religion, and began a phase of "acculturation." Therefore, Christianity was not integrated as being *the* universal religion. On the contrary, it was modified to be understandable and, subsequently, adopted by the Indians. Christianity was a tool for Indian resurgence, but on no account did it act as an alternative to the Indian traditions and beliefs. It allowed reviving beliefs that had faded since the missionaries' arrival.

In the efforts of Handsome Lake and Kenekuk, the meaning of acculturation is better understood. "The Indians were more willing to accept acculturation – the process of intercultural borrowing between two or more diverse peoples that

results in a new and blended culture.”<sup>10</sup> Their purpose was not to replace the Indian beliefs and convert them to an alien religion, which was so different from their own concept of spirituality. It was necessary to reinterpret Christianity and integrate it into a new type of religion.

Handsome Lake was, indeed, in favor of change among the Senecas and he believed acculturation could provide such a change. Since their arrival in the Allegheny, the missionaries attempted to bring acculturation through education and, obviously, through Christianity. They thought that if Indian children attended mission school – the Quakers established a mission school among the Allegheny Seneca in 1798—they would, eventually, be “civilized.” Therefore, acculturation would lead to assimilation. While some missionaries succeeded in convincing Natives that attending school was the key to “civilization,” Handsome Lake gave another meaning to education. His opinion on education can be found in his Code, *Section 26*, during “the Recitation of the Second Day,” the “time consumed in reciting the Gai’wiio’ [the record of the teachings of Handsome Lake] is always three days.”<sup>11</sup> The section is the following:

“Now another message to tell your relatives. This concerns education. It is concerning studying in English schools. Now let the council appoint twelve people to study, two from each nation of the Six. So many white people are about you that you must study to know their ways.” So they said and he said. Eniaiehuk.<sup>12</sup>

From this teaching, education was only a means for the Senecas to be intellectually “on the same level” with the whites. Handsome Lake proved that “studying to know [the white man’s] ways” would be entirely to their advantage, for it would allow the Senecas to better defend their rights on a political ground.

It is particularly in the Second, or Social Gospel, that acculturation was clearly more defined.<sup>13</sup> This period corresponds to the years when Handsome Lake went to Washington to visit President Thomas Jefferson. During these years, these men met to put into effect the Seneca technical aid program. The visit during the winter 1801-02 proved successful. The two men discussed the importance of plows, oxen, yokes, chains, milk cows, sheep, carding and spinning equipment that might be given to several reservations. It was also suggested that Congress could appropriate \$15,000 annually to “civilize” the Indians.<sup>14</sup> Handsome Lake was concerned with five major tenets: “temperance, peace and unity, land retention, acculturation, and a revised domestic morality.”<sup>15</sup> It shall be noted that this change from the apocalyptic themes of the First Gospel to a focus on social matters was, in part, due to the progressive faction among the Senecas, whose political and social ideas tended to a pro-acculturation policy, in part to federal officials who supported his movement, and in part to the Quakers living among the Senecas. And as the Senecas would soon be surrounded by Whites, Handsome Lake decided that they had to learn how to farm: “... Handsome Lake opportunely conceded that ‘the white people were going to

settle all around them; that they could not live unless they learned to farm, and follow the white people's ways, etc.'"<sup>16</sup> Handsome Lake sought help from experienced people, the Quakers, who had exemplary farming models. A number of things were, nevertheless, controlled. The Quakers wanted the banning of whiskey, mixed social dancing to the music of the violin, gambling with cards, and they wanted to punish evildoers by handcuffing and whipping them, and even imprisoning them.<sup>17</sup>

Like Handsome Lake, Kenekuk also advocated cultural change. Kenekuk did not consider it necessary to rebel against the Americans. On the contrary, Kenekuk advocated "peace" and "passive resistance."<sup>18</sup> The association of these two terms emphasizes his attitude toward the Americans, an attitude that could be described as un confrontational because he chose to remain passive in front of threats uttered to his people, but also on the very definition of "resistance," what implies that he did oppose authority, in this particular case the American government. In short, it means that Kenekuk was in favor of acculturation while retaining an Indian identity, in order to distinguish themselves from the White citizens.

In order to be able to retain their Indian identity, Kenekuk showed the advantage acculturation could bring. Like the Seneca Prophet, he preached the moral tenets found in the Social Gospel of the Code of Handsome Lake.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, when many Indians lost their tribal identities, their possessions, and their lands, the Vermillion Indians of the Wabash prospered. They owed their survival to Kenekuk, especially to his religious tenets stressing peace, temperance, and land retention, as well as his insistence that men farm the fields – a radical departure from the Indian custom that assigned farming to women. Kenekuk knew what his people endured: "The most of those of my color are foolish and wicked. I have had the good fortune to be instructed by the Great Spirit in a good and correct course." That course proved to be a practical accommodation to white society.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the Kickapoos' had their own interpretation of acculturation. To them, acculturation represented a defensive means for survival as a people by allowing small concessions.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, adopting the White model farm was a minor concession as long as they could, in return, freely practice their religion. Over the years, they came to adhere to a "Protestant-like work ethic." Kenekuk's notions of society and religion were, without any doubt, syncretic. Kenekuk saw "the need to make some accommodation." He knew that a syncretic society would enable the Kickapoos to defend and protect their lands from white assaults. If the White settlers saw that the Kickapoos "behaved" more like Euro-Americans than Indians, they would probably let the Natives live near White settlements.

Kenekuk always stressed peace with the Whites to protect his people from removal (although they were eventually forced to move). Unlike Tenskwatawa's teachings, no anti-white sentiments were perceptible in Kenekuk's religion. "[He] knew that the violent anti-American policies of Tecumseh and the Shawnee

Prophet had been disastrous, and [he was] determined that the Vermillion Kickapoos would avoid similar confrontations in the future.”<sup>21</sup>

Tenskwatawa advocated acculturation as a means to preserve their native identity. According to the Shawnee Prophet, preserving their identity meant that no concessions should be made with regard to Euro-American ways. His teaching reflected, indeed, a strong anti-American policy. Such hatred toward the Americans was emphasized in his doctrine advocating a return to traditional life. Among other commands, “Tenskwatawa urged [his followers] to return to the communal life of the past. ... The Shawnees and other Indians also were admonished to return to the food, implements, and dress of their ancestors.”<sup>22</sup> This return to the communal life was in complete opposition to what both Handsome Lake and Kenekuk preached. Tenskwatawa did not think that a change in native spirituality and social system would redefine the Indians as an independent nation. On the contrary, Tenskwatawa declared that abandoning all the European goods—that colonization had provided—would enable the Indians to re-emerge as an independent nation. Through traditional life, the Indians would reaffirm their social power. That is why the Shawnees had to avoid all that represented and symbolized the impact of Euro-American technology.

Although guns might be used for self-defense, warriors were to hunt with bows and arrows. Stone or wood implements should replace metal ones and the tribesmen were to discard all items of European or American clothing. “You must not dress like the White Man or wear hats like them...And when the weather is not severe, you must go naked excepting the breach cloth, and when you are clothed, it must be in skins or leather of your own dressing.” Moreover, the warriors were ordered to shave their heads, leaving only the scalp lock worn in the past.<sup>23</sup>

Tenskwatawa did not, at first, realize that Indians had to adapt if they wanted to survive. By completely returning to a traditional life, the Shawnees would simply die. Nevertheless, Tenskwatawa continued to oppose the civilizing mission, so common among Indian tribes. Unlike Handsome Lake, Tenskwatawa did not particularly favor the Quakers’ settlement near the Shawnee town of Wapakoneta in the Ohio area. According to the Shawnee Prophet, “... Kirk [a Quaker missionary was] a ‘Master’ imposed on the Indians by the president, ‘from which circumstance it was Evident that the President intended making women of the Indians—but when the Indians were all united, they would be respected as men’.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, Tenskwatawa’s religion was not entirely traditional, for like Kenekuk and Handsome Lake’s doctrines, it comprised elements of Christianity.

Through their contact with European culture, the Indians eventually came to convert to Christianity or to appropriate some elements of the white men’s religion, while they rejected other concepts because of these concepts’ opposition to native spirituality. References to the Christian Devil show once more that the Indian prophets were acquainted with missionaries’ teachings. Heaven was described by Handsome Lake as a place where they could “[smell]

the flowers, and admir[e] the delicious fruits by the side of the road and the birds flying in the air. They refreshed themselves at a spring whose clear water, once placed in a bottle, could not be exhausted.”<sup>25</sup> This description is much like that of Christian Heaven.

As for the Shawnee Prophet, he also recounted what the Master of Life showed him when he fell into a trance. Like the Seneca Prophet, Lalawethika was guided by two men to see “both the past and the future.” Unlike Handsome Lake, he was not allowed to “enter heaven,” but was “permitted to gaze on a paradise,” which he described as:

A rich, fertile country, abounding in game, fish, pleasant hunting grounds, and fine corn fields, a realm where the spirits of virtuous Shawnees could flourish, pursuing the same course of life which characterized them here. They [could] plant, hunt, [or] play at their usual games and in all things [could remain] unchanged.<sup>26</sup>

Lalawethika depicted the world in which the Shawnees’ ancestors lived. At that time, that is prior to colonization, there were “hunting grounds” and “fine corn fields.” He gave an idyllic vision of the past in order to urge his tribesmen to return to their traditional life. And to better convince the Shawnees to abandon Euro-American lifestyle, Lalawethika depicted another place where wrongdoers were punished and condemned to suffer.

Christianity unquestionably influenced Kenekuk’s teachings<sup>27</sup> and the numerous similarities with Protestantism proved it. Historian Joseph Herring compares Kenekuk with the famous New York lawyer Charles G. Finney, “the father of modern revivalism, [who] experienced a soul-shaking conversion that he interpreted as a ‘retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead his cause’.”<sup>28</sup> Another similarity with Finney is that Kenekuk’s teaching differed from the Calvinist “Protestant theological system,” which “develops Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone into an emphasis on the grace of God and centres on the doctrine of predestination – the divine foreordaining of all that will happen, especially with regard to the salvation of some and not others.”<sup>29</sup> From this definition, salvation was now open to all, and that Kenekuk’s reference to the nineteenth-century revivalist doctrine puts Protestantism as a major element of his new syncretic religion.

Kenekuk’s religion is the perfect example of syncretism. Because the Kickapoo Prophet held prayer meetings during which his “fiery sermons often aroused his listeners to a fever pitch,”<sup>30</sup> white ministers came to conclude that his religion bore resemblance to Roman Catholicism.

Kenekuk preached the doctrine of his new religion during camp meetings. These camp meetings, and what occurred during such gathering, were also elements the Indian prophets borrowed from Christianity. While Kenekuk played the role of an evangelist, Handsome Lake and Lalawethika experienced visions through a trance, a phenomenon whose “frenzied dancing tends to induce

hyperventilation and cause mental dissociation..."<sup>31</sup> In *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, Anthony F. C. Wallace describes events that occurred at Protestant camp meetings in early 1800. By describing these meetings, Wallace emphasizes on the ecstatic effect a trance could provide:

A contemporary observer described the scene: "when a person begins to be affected, he generally sinks down in the place where he stood, and is for few minutes overwhelmed in tears; he then makes a weeping noise—he shrieks aloud—and discovers a desire to be on his back—in this he is indulged. Every tear now leaves his eye and he shouts aloud for about 20 minutes. Meanwhile the features of his face are calm and regular. His voice becomes more and more feeble for about 20 minutes more. By this time he is speechless and motionless, and lies quiet perhaps an hour. During this time his pulse is rather lower than the usual state—the extremities are cold, the skin fresh and clear, the features of the face full, the eyes closed, but not so closed as in sleep. Speech and motion return in the same gradual manner; the features become more full than before. Some victims suffered from "the jerks" in which the whole body was seized with violent contortions. Some danced for hours, others ran, some turned cartwheels endlessly. In Kentucky groups of people ran about on all fours, barking, snarling, and baring their teeth like dogs."<sup>32</sup>

These words are important because they compare some physical behaviors with those of Handsome Lake and Lalawethika when they experienced visions. Additionally, given the very strange behavior of some people during these camp meetings, it is quite surprising that Native American religious practices and dances were proscribed and that Puritan ministers denounced "all pre-contact activity as devil worship."<sup>33</sup>

Although the Indian prophets were not familiar with the teachings of the Bible—because they could not read the Bible—they, nevertheless, borrowed some biblical doctrines from what they heard or learned from the missionaries' preaching. They seemed to be particularly interested in apocalyptic themes. While experiencing visions, both Handsome Lake and Tenskwatawa referred to apocalyptic scenes. They warned their tribesmen of a sudden and dramatic intervention of the Great Spirit or the Master of Life, of the judgment of all men, the salvation of the faithful believers, and of a renewed heaven and earth. These warnings were given by Handsome Lake in the "First, or Apocalyptic Gospel" of his Code. His description of the Apocalypse was much more detailed because of its codification. This Gospel was composed of three visions that occurred from June 15, 1799 to February 5, 1800. During this vision, the Seneca Prophet developed three main themes: "the imminent destruction of the world," "the definition of sin," and "the prescription for salvation."



Because Europeans had brought epidemics, whiskey, and social disruption among native tribes, Handsome Lake warned his people that the world would be soon destroyed. He used terms such as "great drops of fire" or "the veil-over-all" to highlight the catastrophic situation in which colonization had put Native Americans. He set out the apocalyptic theme during his third vision.

In consulting the New Testament "the fulfillment of the promise of the Old Testament,"<sup>34</sup> it is clearly noticed that the early-nineteenth-century Indian prophets drew from the Holy Scriptures Christian teachings in order to create their new religion. For instance, Handsome Lake and Tenskwatawa referred to "false prophets"—the traditional shamans who opposed their new doctrines—an idea that can be found in the *Gospel of St. Matthew*, 7:15: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves."<sup>35</sup> The Seneca Prophet also warned his tribesmen of the "poisonous creatures from the underworld." Here, the "poisonous creatures" are reminiscent of the locusts in the *Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 9:3-4:

And out of the smoke came forth locusts upon the earth; and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was said unto them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree, but only such men as have not the seal of God on their foreheads.

Handsome Lake's doctrine also bore a striking resemblance with the *Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*. Tenskwatawa's first vision also contained apocalyptic notions, even though these notions were taken from a traditional Native American myth. His vision concerned the "true character of the Americans" the Master of Life had revealed.

According to Tenskwatawa, in the vision, the Long Knives had taken the form of a great ugly crab that had crawled from the sea, its claws full of mud and seaweed. Meanwhile, the Master of Life had spoken, saying, "Behold this crab. It comes from Boston and brings with it part of the land in that vicinity. If you Indians will do everything which I have told you, I will overturn the land, so that all the white people will be covered and you alone shall inhabit the land."<sup>36</sup>

Kenekuk, for example, referred to "eternal damnation," or "burning pits," but did not warn his followers that the world would end unless they repent. The Kickapoos had learned many Catholic rituals from Jesuit priests. Even after Jesuit priests left Wisconsin, the Kickapoos continued to practice some Catholic rituals.

After settling in the area between the Wabash River and Vermillion River in the eighteenth century, the Kickapoos had lost contact with the priests but had continued to practice some Catholic rites. Under Kenekuk, these observances were reinforced and intensified. Indeed, the prophet's followers worshiped Jesus,

the Virgin, and the saints; they believed in Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. They also faithfully attended formal services on Sundays and holy days.<sup>37</sup>

However, it should be noted that Kenekuk's religion *was* syncretic. It was his own interpretation of the Scriptures that he preached to the Kickapoos and other Indians in the Indiana-Illinois region. In fact, his gospel departed significantly from conventional Christianity; it contained an implicit cultural nationalism that *merged with*, rather than *superseded*, traditional Indian beliefs (emphasis added).<sup>38</sup>

These prophets had the same desire for Native Americans: that of saving the Indian nations according to new methods. As explained, one of these new methods was to warn them about an "imminent destruction of the world." All these warnings were intended to make the Indians understand and accept that they had sinned. This notion of "sin" resulted from their contact with and their alienation to the Whites. In all the works dedicated to the new prophets, the notion of "sinners" is present. The new religious leaders, who—by default—were also sinners, could more easily make this notion understandable to the Indians, if their people could face what "being a sinner" meant. They also proved that becoming like the Euro-Americans was dangerous for their survival, and that this would progressively lead to the extinction of their nations. By opposing the concept of "civilization," the prophets defined it as contrary to their traditions and values, thus as being sinful. Each prophet used their own terms to describe what would happen to sinners. In each doctrine, the prophets always highlighted the difference between good and evil, or between heaven and hell. This is what Kenekuk did. One can find explicit words in his sermons. Indeed, he warned his people that:

"If you follow the commands, you will go into a good place and be happy forever; but if you do not keep them, you will go into a place prepared for the wicked and suffer endless days and nights of grief." He was convinced that alcoholism threatened the very existence of his people, and he railed against that evil. Those "with floated faces and swelled eyes occasioned by drunkenness," he warned, "must either find the good road or face eternal damnation." Kenekuk predicted that God would soon destroy the evil world: "No supplication will then avail—you will have no opportunity to kneel to Him—the time is past, He will not allow it; your friends cannot intercede—fear will overwhelm you—you will wish to make new resolutions to obey Him, but you cannot, you will go to the burning pits."<sup>39</sup>

As for Tenskwatawa, he considered sinful everything that was linked to Euro-American goods and customs. And as a number of Indians did adopt Euro-American goods and customs, they were, thus, sinners. The Shawnee Prophet was the one who could save their souls because he personally knew what sin

meant. After falling sick, Lalawethika, "the noise maker," awoke and told his people:

My name is Tenskwatawa (He-Who-Opens-The-Door). I have been shown how to open the door that has shut us out from happiness. I died and went to the World above, and saw it. I have done every sin against my people and myself. You knew me! I was a sinner, I was a drunkard! I had another name then. That name is so smeared with the filth of my old sins that my mouth will not utter it, for my mouth is now pure! Tenskwatawa has never spoken a lie or an obscenity, and never will. I have become back cleansed. I am as we were in the Beginning! In me is a shining power.<sup>40</sup>

Tenskwatawa, who had been "... particularly appointed to that office by the Great Spirit," asserted that his "sole object was to reclaim the Indians from bad habits and to cause them to live in peace with all mankind."<sup>41</sup> However, peace was not destined to the souls of sinners, especially those of "the unrepentant alcoholics." Indeed, "special tortures" awaited them—we can easily imagine that these tortures were much like what Handsome Lake described in the First, or Apocalyptic Gospel. According to Handsome Lake, sin could be found in four evil words: witchcraft, love magic, abortion, and drunkenness. And these sins could be avoided if the Indians followed and believed in *Gaiwiio*—Handsome Lake's revelations. "Belief in *Gaiwiio* was important ... not because of the efficacy of pure faith, but because of its exclusive power to dissuade men and women from committing the great sins..."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Wallace points out that "The definition of sin, of course, ... constituted the groundwork for the second, or social gospel."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, from 1801 until his death in 1815, Handsome Lake attempted to condemn sin by preaching social tenets as mentioned earlier. Through "temperance"—that is the prohibition of whiskey and what "were the social evils attendant upon drinking: family quarrels, mistreatment of children, lowered economic productivity, and mayhem and murder of drinking parties"<sup>44</sup>—and "a revised domestic morality" that consisted in pursuing "personal salvation, social betterment, and postponement of the apocalypse,"<sup>45</sup> Handsome Lake managed to cope with social disorders brought by colonization.

Naturally, sin did not go without redemption. To be saved, you must repent. The prophets succeeded in making the notion of "redemption" ... and salutary to a great part of their people and of the neighboring instance, Kenekuk's followers "could avoid hell fire and brimstone by renouncing their sins at public confessions on Fridays."<sup>46</sup> Confession of the ritual changes Handsome Lake proposed. The Seneca Prophet told his people that "... If all the world would repent the earth would be renewed again. Because of sin the underworld is crumbling with decay. Turn away from sin."<sup>47</sup> Handsome Lake believed that repentance could be

individual salvation. Wallace points out that “[individual salvation] gradually became a customary act even for those whose sins were less heinous.”<sup>48</sup>

The Indian prophets were more willing to forgive those who have committed moderate sins—though they remained sinners who had to repent. But, they would certainly not forgive those who were accused of witchcraft. One prophet said:

Now another message. Now we think that when the end comes the earth will be destroyed by fire and not one upon it will escape for all the earth will be enveloped in flames and all those who refuse to believe in Gai’wio’ will be in it. So they said and he said. Eniaiehuk.<sup>49</sup>

This punishment awaited those who opposed the prophets’ doctrines. The Indian prophets, most certainly, had a right to practice their religion as long as their doctrines were acknowledged as being beneficial and salutary for the Indian nations. The numerous accounts on the early nineteenth century, when the prophets endeavoured to maintain a moral order among their communities by threat or even by executions, make us understand that—in some instances—they reproduced scenes from the seventeenth-century tragic events: the witch-hunts. In 1692 charge of witchcraft occurred in Salem village—in the Massachusetts Bay Colony—and dramatic executions resulted. This was known in American history, as the Salem witch trials.

This event proves that it was rather easy to accuse someone of witchcraft and to spread hysteria and fear within a village or a tribe. Witchcraft among the Indians was only a matter of opposing the new doctrines. Handsome Lake and Tenskwatawa accused and sentenced those people to death who opposed or threatened the prophets’ leadership.

Witchcraft was one of the evil practices Handsome Lake denounced during his third vision. It was also one of the main reasons why the “world was full of sin.” And to prevent the world to be full of sin, the Seneca Prophet committed himself to destroy those who poisoned the Seneca villages. While the fear of witches rose among the community, Handsome Lake’s role shifted from “merely a preacher, a messenger of the messenger” to “dictatorial and even grandiose, and on one occasion at least he presented himself as divine. This arrogation of personal supernatural power was based on revelation, too.”<sup>50</sup> Given his new role, the Seneca Prophet embarked on a “campaign” for purging the souls of the wrongdoers.

In the fall of 1800, he was persuaded by the messengers that he was clairvoyant, able to see down into the earth as deep as the elm’s roots and that it was his personal responsibility not merely to preach the gospel but “to judge the earth and cure diseases.” This was no mere responsibility, for as a shaman as he had the power to diagnose witchcraft. And apocalyptic fears led him to use his power to launch the Great witch-hunt and to assume, for a short time, the unprecedented role of dictator of the Iroquois.<sup>51</sup>

While Handsome Lake was willing to discover who practised witchcraft, he was—as Wallace points out—“reluctant to practice as a diviner.” As soon as Cornplanter learned that the angels had appointed Handsome Lake as a clairvoyant, the Seneca chief came with an offering of tobacco and asked his half brother to prophecy (Cornplanter’s daughter was very sick and needed medicines to be cured). But Handsome Lake refused twice until he was forced “to admit that he did not have an obligation to the people, and he promised, despite the lack of complete authorization from the angels, to do what he could.”<sup>52</sup> Was it not the role of a Prophet to “... judge diseases and cure remedies?” The message in *Section 51* of the Code said that “... if any trouble comes and anyone asks the help of the prophet, he must give it freely, but they who ask must give an offering of tobacco ... when the time comes for you to exercise your power we will tell you and then you may judge the earth and cure diseases.”<sup>53</sup> Though Cornplanter came with tobacco, though the angels had told him that he could “judge the earth and cure diseases,” Handsome Lake did not give his help freely. His refusal and his inability to cure his niece earned him criticism and reproaches.

Tenskwatawa also allowed witches to confess and repent. And yet, it seems that the Shawnee Prophet had a tendency to favor execution rather than repentance. Those who were accused by the Shawnee Prophet were, mostly, prominent persons among their community—persons who could represent a threat to his leadership. Tenskwatawa knew that he had to separate from these pro-Americans chiefs, the Prophet’s strong opponents, who opposed the Great Spirit’s commands and cultivated ties with the Americans. Once again, the Delawares were the main target. He claimed that:

The Great Spirit had given him the power to discover witches, even among powerful leaders of the community. To find the guilty parties, the prophet stood the villages in a circle about him, and “after a great many ceremonies,” he pointed to the evil beings. Tenskwatawa’s witch-hunt initially hit the Delawares with the greatest severity. The prophet had been living among the Delawares when he experienced his first visions. ... All of the known condemned Delawares had close ties with the Americans and with the civilizing missions. Two of the condemned were chiefs: Tetepachsit and Hackingpomska, and they had both signed the Greenville Treaty of 1795 and had ceded land to the United States at the Delaware Treaty of 1804, agreeing that the new annuities would be “exclusively appropriated to the purpose of ameliorating their condition and promising their civilization. . . . Tenskwatawa’s Delaware targets accepted, even cultivated, direct intervention in Indian government, religion, and society. For such evil they had to die.”<sup>54</sup>

As a prophet, Tenskwatawa had to maintain law and order among his tribesmen. If the witches—those who favored civilization and a change in the Indian political system—brought only disorder and wickedness, they challenged

his authority. Therefore, his role was to prevent such disorder to happen. Indeed, "... order in tribal society reflected the will of the Master of Life, and the Prophet felt obligated to restore and protect such stability."<sup>55</sup> Restoring such order implied tortures and executions, which lasted for several months. Some of these accounts describe the cruelty of the executions. Tenskwatawa had accused the Indians of witchcraft—"he pointed to the evil beings," as in some instances of these executions. They took place at Woapikamunk, Indiana, in a Delaware village where most tribesmen were former Christians. The victims were Anne Charity, Tetepachsit, and Joshua, a Mohican. They all had ties with the Moravians. Under such tortures, most individuals admitted being witches.

The witch-hunts caught the attention of General William Henry Harrison, who denounced such barbarous acts and urged the Indians to test the power of this "notorious impostor." He sent a letter in which he expressed his grief and indignation after the news of the witch-hunts reached Vincennes. William Henry Harrison wanted to make the Indians realize that such executions were unwarranted and that the Shawnee Prophet had no right to decide who should live and who should die. In a word, he had to stop playing the Prophet.

To prove that Tenskwatawa was a charlatan, Harrison suggested the Delawares should ask him to perform miracles. If Tenskwatawa was really God's messenger, he could easily perform miracles. In the letter addressed to the Delawares, Harrison went on stating: "If he is really a prophet, ask him to cause the sun to stand still—the moon to alter its course—the rivers to cease to flow—or the dead to rise from their graves. If he does these things, you may then believe that he has been sent from God."<sup>56</sup> Harrison hoped to expose Tenskwatawa as an impostor. Ironically, his demand did just the opposite. Harrison had forgotten about the eclipse that would occur on June 16. Therefore, it was rather easy for the Prophet to accept the challenge. Throughout the spring of 1806 several teams of astronomers and other scientists had traveled over Indiana, Kentucky, and Illinois establishing observation stations to study an eclipse of the sun scheduled to occur on June 16. Tenskwatawa was aware of the scientists' activities. Moreover, he knew that among the Shawnees, such an eclipse was called Mukutaaweethee Keesohtoa, a Black Sun; an event surrounded with dread, and supposedly warning of future warfare.<sup>57</sup> Tenskwatawa knew that this eclipse would prove to doubters and opponents that he was really a prophet among his tribesmen. To do so, the Shawnee Prophet decided to gather his followers at Greenville. There he announced, "... at Greenville on June 16, 1806, he would make the sun to stand still and turn day into night."<sup>58</sup>

Kenekuk's proof of his supernatural powers was far less spectacular than Tenskwatawa's. And yet, the Kickapoo Prophet tried to impress his listeners by revealing what he had done. To defy an "ethnocentric" Jesuit priest, Van Quickerborne, who came to the Kickapoo villages on July 4, 1835, to proselytize Kenekuk claimed that, like the biblical prophets, he too had performed miracles.

This is the very way I got to be believed when I began to preach," Kenekuk said; "I raised the dead to life. There was a woman, who, so everyone thought, could not possibly recover her health: I breathed on her and from that moment she began to improve and is now in good health. Another time I saw an infant just about to die; I took it in my arms and at the end of a few days it was cured."<sup>59</sup>

However, the indication did not convince the Black Robe who replied, "Kenekuk had merely doctored the sick and had not performed any miracles."<sup>60</sup> At first, Kenekuk was angered that someone contradicted his sayings. After a few minutes, Kenekuk regained his composure. He knew that a violent reaction against whites, whether they be Americans or not, could endanger his living in Kansas.

While Kenekuk used "passive resistance" toward the Americans or toward missionaries as we have seen, he was not passive when he dealt with his followers' repentance. Kenekuk introduced a new element, which differed from Catholic absolution. The new element, which made the wrongdoers understand that they should not commit any more faults, was the use of a whip to pay for their sins. It is quite surprising that a man who advocated peace favored such an act to save their tribesmen's souls.

These movements were a blend of respect, fear, religiosity, acculturation, and nativism. Whether or not the Indians adhered to their doctrines, the Native American prophets unquestionably brought novelty and revived a spirituality that was collapsing. But the Indian seers did more than preaching a new doctrine. Being a religious leader in early nineteenth century implied that they also had to be skilled in the arts of politics, for religion and politics merged. Indeed, it is interesting to compare the opposition between "progressives"—those in favor of acculturation—and "traditionalists"—those having a more conservative view on civilization.

### Notes

1. Ralph Linton, "Nativistic Movements," *American Anthropologist* 45 (1943), quoted in Munro S. Edmonson, *Nativism, Syncretism, and Anthropological Science* (New Orleans: Middle America Research Institute, Tulane University, 1960), 183.

2. Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

3. Encyclopedia.com using the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., s.v. "Revitalization Movement" (cited 2002). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/39505.html>

4. Encyclopedia.com using the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., s.v. "Prophet Among Native Americans" (cited 2002). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/10554AmongNativeAmericans.html>

5. Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle Jr., and William J. Brophy, *A People and a Nation:*

*A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: ARA Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 245.

6. *Ibid.*, 156.

7. Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle Jr., and William J. Brophy, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: ARA Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 245.

8. *Ibid.*, 244-245.

9. Munro S. Edmonson, *Nativism, Syncretism, and Anthropological Science* (New Orleans: Middle America Research Institute, Tulane University, 1960), 192.

10. Joseph B. Herring, *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 5.

11. William Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 38.

13. Anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace stresses that "... the principles of what may be called a social gospel ... were latent even in the primary vision [of which we shall speak later in the discussion] and they became increasingly manifest during the period from 1801 to 1803." Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 277.

14. R. S. Cotterill, "The Southern Indians: The Story of the Civilized Tribes Before Removal" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 226, quoted in Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 266.

15. *Ibid.*, 278.

16. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM), *Pierce Journal*, D 10 A, quoted in Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 265.

17. *Ibid.*, 282.

18. *Ibid.*, 3.

19. "Minutes of a Talk of the Kickapoo Prophet," May 24, 1828, LR, St. Louis Superintendency, BIA, RG75, M234, R748, quoted in Joseph B. Herring, *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 36.

20. *Ibid.*, 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 37.

23. Entry for December 3, 1805, Diary of the Little Indian Congregation on the White River for the Year 1805, *Indiana Historical Collections* 23: 392; Speech by Le Magouis, May 4, 1807, M222, roll 2, 859-61, National Archives. Also see Henry Schoolcraft, "Discourse Delivered before the Historical Society of Michigan," (Detroit: G. L. Whitney, 1830), quoted in R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 37.

24. Wells to Deaborn, Fort Wayne, April 23, 1808, *TPUS*, 7: 560, quoted in Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 137. Dowd further pointed out that "The Prophet's concern with the civilizing mission and the gender revolution it entailed grew out of both the very earthly grounds that it robbed Indians of their political independence and the cosmological proposition that it robbed Indians of the favor of sacred powers. He and other opponents of the mission directed their most searing attacks at its Indian sponsors, whom they believed were undermining the strength of the Indian peoples." Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 137.

25. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, 245.

26. Edmunds, 33.

27. Before Kenekuk's "rebirth," a priest welcomed him into his home and taught him the Holy Scriptures. Joseph B. Herring, *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 27.



28. Mary Beth Norton et al., 244.
29. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2000.
30. Ibid.
31. Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* (Fort Worth: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1989), 101.
32. Wallace, 216-217.
33. Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 119.
34. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2000.
35. References to "false prophets" are later mentioned in the Gospel of S. Matthew in 24:11, and 24:24.
36. Edmunds, 38.
37. Ibid., 29.
38. Ibid., 27.
39. Gurdon S. Hubbard, "A Kickapoo Sermon," *Illinois Monthly Magazine* 1 (October 1831): 473-476, quoted in Joseph B. Herring, *Kenekuk: The Kickapoo Prophet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 30-31.
40. *Words of the Shawnee* (cited 20 May, 2002). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.ilhawaii.net/%7Estony/shawnee.html>
41. Edmunds, 34-35.
42. Wallace, 250-251.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 278.
45. Ibid., 282-83.
46. Herring, 31.
47. It is possible to see that the Indians were influenced by Christianity from Fenton stating that "The author indicates that the under-world was thought to be a dark region beneath the surface of the earth who were confined the creations of the evil-minded spirits." Fenton, 43.
48. Wallace, 253.
49. Fenton, 57.
50. Wallace, 253.
51. Ibid., 253-54.
52. Ibid., 255.
53. Fenton, 49.
54. Dowd, 137.
55. Edmunds, 39.
56. Harrison to the Delawares, 1806, Esarey, *Harrison Letters*, 1: 182-84; "On the Prophet," George Winter Papers, Tippecanoe County Historical Society; Entry for April 18, 1806, Diary of the Little Indian Congregation on the White River for the Year 1806, *Indiana Historical Collections*, 23: 421-22, quoted in Russell David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 47.
57. Glenn Tucker, *Tecumseh: Vision of Glory* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1973),
99. Vernon Kinietz and Erminie Wheeler-Voegelien, eds., "'Shawnee Traditions': C. C. Trowbridge's Account," *Occasional Contributions from the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan*, 9. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939), 37, quoted in R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 48.
58. Robert Cwiklik, *Tecumseh: Shawnee Rebel* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1993), 64.
59. Herring, 105.
60. Charles F. Van Quickenborne wrote about this exchange with Kenekuk in "Relation d'un voyage fait chez les tribus indiennes situées à l'ouest du Missouri," September 24, 1835, *Annales de la propagation de la foi* 9 (September, 1836): 99-101. For an English

translation see Gilbert J. Garraghan, *The Jesuits of the Middle United States*, 3 vol. (New York: America Press, 1938), 1: 388-389, s.v. "Kickapoo Mission."